

# English for Specific Playfulness?

How doctoral students find fun in the development of genre knowledge, authorial voice, and genre innovation.

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# Background and inspiration

“I will not mix genres.

“I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them”

*Derrida (1980, Transl. by Ronell)*

# Risks of genre pedagogy

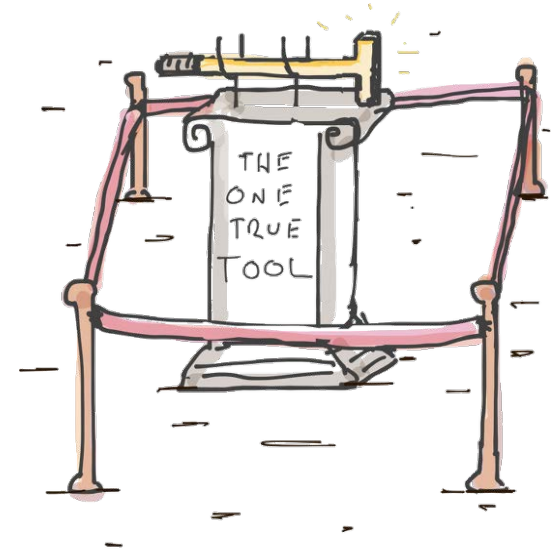
“excessive and stultifying standardization”

(Swales, 2017, p. 251)

- Genre acquisition rather than awareness
- Genre “repetition” rather than agentive performance



- Risk of prescriptivist approaches to conventions
- Risk of homogenization of genres
- Risk of genres as instruments of power rather than living language



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# Background and inspiration – pedagogical issues

Promoting awareness of variation is as important as helping students identify conventions:

“alternative ways of understanding an issue or constructing knowledge; expressing oneself in unique ways; engaging readers; and resisting, changing and critiquing dominant discourses.” (Tardy, 2016 p. 131)



# Background and inspiration – genre innovation

Genres as social actions pose the potential for innovation beyond linguistic form. Innovation can occur:

- **Linguistic and textual form** (unusual word choices, non-canonical grammar forms, mixing of linguistic codes, unconventional move structures)
- **Modality**
- **Rhetorical aims and strategies** (unconventional use of stance and engagement markers, use of rhetorical appeals uncommon to the genre)
- **Content** (unusual or unexpected ideas)
- **Practice** (approach to methodology, design, and composition).



(Tardy, 2016)

# Scaffolding genre knowledge - (Negretti & McGrath 2018)

## Genre knowledge themes elicited in the interviews

- Genre knowledge as a tool in the writing process
- Genre knowledge as metacognition: Monitoring, evaluating and thinking about writing
- Rhetorical genre knowledge: textual analysis, critical reading, and reader/audience awareness
- Variation, possibility and choice in writing

# Questions

- Do PhD students make deliberate authorial choices or do they glumly surrender to conventions?
- Is there any evidence of genre bending, innovation, and genre play in their ongoing writing for research practices?
- Is there any evidence that they derive a sense of enjoyment or empowerment in their writing?

# The study: design and method

- Setting: PhD course in academic writing – ESP pedagogy
- Participants: 30 PhD students in science and engineering
- Data Collection: Interviews with participants after course (at time of paper submission), 3-6 months after course.
- Procedure:
  - Extracted data from larger data set complemented with new data (6 interviews), independently by both authors.
  - Compiled New Dataset (the shared part of our independent coding)
  - Organized Dataset into Themes / selected and verified examples



# Data analysis: what we looked for

Comments where students indicate deliberate authorial choices motivated by audience personal rhetorical goals

Comments where students report bending of typical genre conventions (as they perceive them)

Comments where students report changes in their perception of and /or attitude towards academic writing with positive connotations

# Findings – Manipulation of genre: audience/rhetorical goals

- Many metacognitive authorial choices
- Genre manipulation motivated by audience
- Genre manipulation motivated by own rhetorical goals

P16 If you want to summarise it in a few sentences, **what is the main point.**  
And I think **that's what I tried to do.**

P22 So the journal that I am submitting to is the one that actually works with **the second (field)...**, so those people are actually more **acquainted** with these kind of literature.

P9 when I was revising the paper I was trying to remind myself to **think about who I wanted to communicate to**, so this idea of telling a story **and knowing who this story is addressed**

## Findings 2. Manipulation of genre: Innovation/bending/critique

P5 So many times you see people doing these studies and they get **“oh here's an optimal design”**. **And that's it. They don't say anything else.** The bigger lesson comes when you can say why it is, and I'm going to do that for a journal paper in the future.

P12 The introduction I made a lot of changes to. **From reading other articles, I felt that they were not always very clear** with the order of how they throw in things into the introduction.

P29 So for example to **make the introduction appealing to the reader** (paper 1 intro): “resulted in an **impressive control**” ... “is a **fascinating effect**” ... **“too minute for terrestrial affairs”**

P20 Well, I could look at the difference between the two papers, and take what I liked sort of from it. **I think I like (paper 1) writing more...** it's sort of **like a puzzle** and everything is a piece. **I tried to do a little bit like that.**

## Findings 3. Agency and affect: enjoyment and empowerment

- Changes in perceptions of writing
- Changes in perceptions about themselves as writers

P6 That's why I appreciated the course a lot because **you gained your awareness of writing and the power of writing** [...] I like to write, and I like to learn how to become a better writer.

P18 I want to know what I'm writing. If the words I'm selecting are matching my perspective ... I think I've learned a lot from the course and it's improved my writing, but it has also made the task of writing much more difficult. Because now I know I have to consider all this stuff that could affect my writing and the audience perception. I think it's more difficult, because I need to be aware of more things [...] **Now I know how tall the mountain is. Previously I just went on hiking, didn't really know how tall the mountain was.**

## Findings 3 – Agency from self-regulation of writing

P28 So, sure, you can have some space for creativity, but **I prefer to have a recipe for how to write well**. And this course provided me with more of a recipe than what I had before, **and I like that**. I never really considered learning how to write well before this ... **It's just that this is the way I view it and the more I learn about writing, the less frightening that monster would be.**

## Findings - P. S.

- Realization that academic texts have structures and patterns as “aha” moment
- Nice to be able to put a name on things
- Metacognitive awareness of own writing

P15 So, I thought it was really helpful to have these boxes, building parts, and you could just take them and fill them in, and then later you can, so to speak, fill them with more content or **play around with them**

P6 when you **look at the text with these glasses, you see that you become aware.** It feels like it's things that you maybe already know sometimes but you don't know exactly what it is.

P14 Most things were stuff that I kind of used already, just that I didn't know about it. It's more that **it helped me realize, which way I was writing papers.**

# Discussion and final thoughts

- Not much play, but definitely genre bending (Tardy 2016): Small textual aspects, language, deliberate authorial choices for personal rhetorical goals and audience.
- Evidence does not speak to slavish replication of conventions but deliberate genre manipulation
- A sense of empowerment and increased enjoyment is palpable – self-efficacy/agency

# Thank you!

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